

Skokomish Watershed Restoration: Two Decades of Work Pays Off

June 2016, www.fs.fed.us/olympic

The Skokomish River is the most frequently flooded river in Washington State, and is critical habitat for Chinook salmon, steelhead, and bull trout, all of which are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. The photo shown on the right, taken by Mark McHenry US Forest Service Fish Biologist, is an all too common sight during annual flooding.



The Olympic National Forest recently reached a watershed restoration milestone, with the completion of large scale road treatments in the upper South Fork Skokomish capping more than 20 years and millions of dollars of restoration work.

Last fall (2015), Olympic National Forest completed the last of the planned large-scale road decommissioning and stabilization projects on National Forest System lands in the upper watershed. In accordance with the Watershed Condition Framework guidelines, the Forest Service has now re-classified the South Fork Skokomish as a “properly functioning” watershed. Watershed conditions are still recovering, but key watershed processes have largely been restored. Watershed conditions and aquatic habitat will continue to improve over time.

“Restoring habitat in the Skokomish River is necessary for salmon recovery in Hood Canal and Puget Sound,” said Joseph Pavel, Natural Resources Director for the Skokomish Tribe. “Completing the Forest Service’s restoration of the upper South Fork watershed is a big step forward.”



Working in partnership with the Skokomish Tribe and Mason County, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently completed an in-depth study of the Skokomish River and recommended congressional authorization of several restoration projects in the Skokomish Valley. Meanwhile, the Tribe and Mason Conservation District expect to complete a multi-year restoration of the Skokomish Estuary this summer.

Background

Restoration of the South Fork Skokomish began in earnest in the early 1990s. By then, the majority of the watershed had been clear-cut and the density of forest roads was high – nearly 4 miles of road per square mile.

In 1994, the Forest Service designated the South Fork Skokomish as a “key watershed” in the Northwest Forest Plan. This designation raised the profile of the watershed and it became a focus of restoration efforts to improve aquatic habitats. Between the early 1990s and 2005, the Olympic National Forest and various partners accomplished \$10.6 million of restoration work, including \$7.9 million for road decommissioning, road stabilization and drainage upgrades.

Starting in 2006, the Skokomish Watershed Action Team (SWAT) – an informal collaborative group representing more than 20 organizations – initiated a major effort to restore the entire Skokomish River



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watershed. The group recognized that its first priority was to complete the restoration work in the upper South Fork before success could be achieved in the lower watershed.

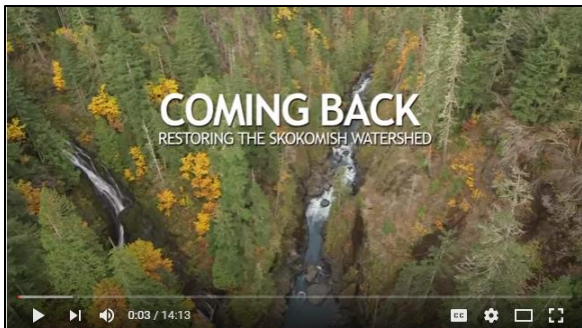
In 2010, as part of a nationwide Watershed Condition Framework process, the Forest Service classified the South Fork Skokomish, along with several other watersheds in the Olympic National Forest, as an “at-risk” watershed. In 2012, the Olympic National Forest reiterated its focus on restoration by designating both the Upper and Middle South Fork Skokomish sub-watersheds as “Priority Watersheds”. The Forest completed [two watershed restoration action plans](#) for the South Fork sub-watersheds which identified the suite of restoration projects that needed to occur on National Forest System lands to put the watershed on a trajectory of recovery.

Between 2006 and 2015, the Forest Service accomplished \$13.2 million in watershed restoration projects in the South Fork, including \$10.9 million to reduce road impacts. Accomplishments included 91 miles of roads decommissioned, closed, or converted to trails, along with 85 miles of roads stabilized or with improved drainage.



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Much of the recent road restoration work was funded by Congress through the Forest Service’s Legacy Roads and Trails Program, with support from former U.S. Representative Norm Dicks and his successor Derek Kilmer, and U.S.



Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell. Additional funding for restoration projects has come from the Washington Salmon Recovery Funding Board, stewardship receipts from commercial thinning timber sales, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Video:

Check out the video [Coming Back: restoring the Skokomish watershed](#) for more information about the collaborative efforts involved in the restoration process.

Websites:

- [Olympic National Forest News Release](#), [Olympic National forest Skokomish Watershed Restoration website](#)